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Article Title: The Mount Athos Manuscripts and their Cataloguing

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Issue Date: December 1987

Publisher: William R. Veder, Slavisch Seminarium, Universiteit van Amsterdam,
Postbus 19188, 1000 GD Amsterdam (Holland)

Citation: *Polata Knigopisnaia: an Information Bulletin Devoted to the Study of Early Slavic Books, Texts and Literatures* 17-18 (December 1987): 106-118.

Appears in:

Community: [Hilandar Research Library](#)

Sub-Community: [Polata Knigopisnaia](#)

Collection: [Polata Knigopisnaia: Volume 17-18 \(December 1987\)](#)

THE MOUNT ATHOS MANUSCRIPTS
AND THEIR CATALOGUING

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The libraries within the monastic republic of Mount Athos contain about 14,500 Greek manuscripts at the present day. Taken as a whole they constitute the largest single collection of Greek manuscripts in the world. This enormous body of material, amassed during the course of ten centuries, cannot be properly studied until it is fully and satisfactorily catalogued. Yet, as anybody can see, the cataloguing of so many thousands of codices is a very difficult undertaking.

This problem of cataloguing the manuscripts of Mount Athos is in fact a question which may merit discussion by this Conference which consists of specialists in the literature and manuscripts traditions of several different languages. The possibility of solving the problem by new methods also deserves consideration. I shall attempt below to present the material concerned, and to describe some of the difficulties which arise in cataloguing it. I shall thus begin with a brief historical survey of the libraries of the Holy Mountain, followed by a short description of them, of the manuscripts they contain, and of the quality of the catalogues that already exist.

The monastic way of life on Mount Athos is a very old indeed. It is true that our written references to organized monasticism there date only from the ninth century, but there can be no doubt that ascetics had already been making it their chosen place of solitary retirement, perhaps since centuries earlier.¹ The co-

enobitic (or community) system of monastic life, however, which is what principally interests us here, was not introduced on Mount Athos until the mid-tenth century. At that time the monk Athanasios, later known as Hosios Athanasios the Athonite, left the monastery where he was living on Mount Kyminas in Bithynia and moved to Athos. There he found the Great Lavra monastery in 963, with financial aid and other support from his friend General (later Emperor) Nikephoros Phokas. From that moment onwards, innumerable other monasteries were founded, inhabited, dissolved and reestablished by turns, almost up to the present day. Out of all these, twenty monasteries, twelve sketes (or retreats) and various kellia (or cells) survive today.

It is a well-recognized fact, especially among codicologists and palaeographers, that a strong link exists between the concepts of the manuscripts codex and of the monk and his monastery. The life of the monastic community, organized and hierarchical in every respect as it was, was an important factor in the creation of libraries and scriptoria. The whole of that great cultural heritage of ours which we call the "manuscript tradition" either originated in monastery workshops or was preserved for us in monastery libraries. The founding of a monastery almost always entailed the establishment of a library as well. For the interest of monastic communities in the acquisition of books to meet their liturgical and spiritual needs is something that can be taken for granted.

So the history of the Athonite libraries begins from the moment when the first coenobitic monastery was established there. We possess no data, as far as I know, to suggest that there were 107

libraries on Mount Athos before Blessed Athanasios, i.e. before the mid-tenth century. Needless to say, we must certainly suppose that majuscule codices, must have been in existence there before that date to supply the liturgical needs of the monks, at the very least: I am chiefly thinking of liturgical codices, Old and New Testaments, Gospel-books and psalters. Yet we do not know at this stage of any fully formed library as such.

Even from the mid-tenth century onwards, however, we have insufficient written information about the Athonite libraries. No medieval inventory has ever been found, and I doubt if any ever will be. Other kinds of historical sources are very rare and scattered in various sorts of publications. The catalogues we do possess are inadequate, as will be seen, and do not help us to reconstruct the history of the libraries. Certain data are available, however. We possess, for example, some information as to the clarification of books in the library of the Great Lavra, during the first centuries after the monastery's foundation. When it has been assessed I hope it will give us a fairly accurate picture of the library as it was up to the thirteenth century at least, and possibly later. If this picture turns out the way I can at present only suppose, it will show us a library containing several hundred MSS of assorted contents, classified by a specific system.²

Nevertheless, the information at our disposal remains scanty. There are, however, good grounds to suppose that the Athonite libraries were largely formed in the first place with the copying of books on the premises - though once again there are few explicit data on this, with the purchase of manuscripts, with their commissioning from other monasteries, possibly out-

side Mount Athos, and, it need hardly be said, with the receipt of gifts. The last of these practices, the bestowal of books as gifts, continued until recent times to be one of the most important ways in which the libraries were enriched. At the same time, however, the libraries also suffered enormous losses during the course of the centuries, owing to natural decay of materials, and to disasters such as fire or plundering. The situation was worsened by the removal or "transfer" of manuscripts from Mount Athos to libraries elsewhere in the world, carried out by official missions³ dispatched to the Greek East, including Mount Athos, especially for that purpose. Nowadays the libraries are rather better protected and losses of this sort scarcely occur.

The exact number of MSS now preserved in the Athonite libraries today is unknown, because recent statistics are not available. Older figures are no longer valid, owing to the following remarkable fact: the Athonite libraries are being enriched all the time by new discoveries of hidden or forgotten manuscripts and by new assessions from smaller settlements on the Holy Mountain or from the personal libraries of individual monks. Incredible as it may seem, this is an everyday reality on Mount Athos, and lifts the number of new acquisitions into the hundreds. In 1982 I attempted a tour of the Athos peninsula with the object of collecting

all the recent figures. Conditions affecting any kind of academic work on Mount Athos are not easy, however, and the attempt was not succesful. Since then I have tried to assemble data by making limited investigations in monastic libraries and by collecting information. Yet our information is unreliable, because 109

often, when it becomes known that manuscripts have been discovered or acquired from somewhere, it is difficult to find out whether they derive from older, catalogued small collections, or are totally uncatalogued. Trustworthy evidence as to a MS's provenance may only be obtained by on-the-spot investigation, which is usually impracticable. At all events, the data we possess, though gathered in the above circumstances, provide the following figures (all are approximate):

- catalogued MSS:	11,700
- attested uncatalogued MSS:	2,000
- estimated uncatalogued MSS:	800

14,500

What texts do these MSS contain? Before we try to give a broad answer to this question, we should consider the material from a chronological point of view. The manuscript of the Athos libraries cover the whole duration of the last ten centuries. Strange as it may seem, manuscripts went on being copied throughout the Greek East long after the invention of printing in the fifteenth century - right through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and into the eighteenth. On Mount Athos this phenomenon can even be seen to have survived in a few instances over the nineteenth century and into our own times. The important point is, however, that the copying of manuscripts should not be regarded as a waning, conservative practice left over from the past, but especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - as the product of a flourishing and conscious creativity whose purpose was the increased production and distribution of hand-copied

books, in parallel with the production of printed books. On Mount Athos in particular, but also in other areas, there were flourishing scriptoria in operation during the sixteenth and, even more, during the seventeenth centuries, with a considerable output, as regards both quantity and quality. The manuscripts from this source constitute between 40% and 50% of the total number in the Athonite libraries; they contain every type of text to be met with in these libraries: liturgical texts, theological works, church music, nomocanons, the works of contemporary Greek writers (mostly theological), and other such texts. The remaining 50% to 60% of the manuscripts in the Athonite libraries consist of older codices from the Byzantine era, with contents similar in type to those of the former group; for the list given in the preceding sentence is typical of the sort of books to be met with in the Athonite libraries as a whole - only the proportions vary. Thus, from the modern period a much larger number of musical manuscripts has survived than from Byzantine times; from the Byzantine period, on the other hand, we possess works by secular writers, which are almost non-existent in the later centuries. (Here a digression may be in order as regards the cataloguing of the manuscripts. There exists a tendency among some scholars to disregard the modern Greek manuscripts. It is indeed true that these codices contribute little to the restoration of older texts, yet that fact does not constitute the sole criterion for evaluating a manuscript. Without entering into a long discussion, suffice it to repeat here that these manuscripts are the product of a creative process and constitute a distinct aspect of the modern Greek culture.). We may now move on to the subject of ma-

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nuscript cataloguing: the preparation of satisfactory catalogues is without doubt the essential preliminary stage in the study and assessment of this vast mass of material. Let us first consider the existing situation.

In many monasteries we come across handwritten catalogues composed by monks during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. These inexpert catalogues were not intended for use by researchers, nor are they suitable in that regard; they simply served the internal needs of the library. Certain foreign scholars made attempts to catalogue MSS on the Holy Mountain, mainly during the nineteenth century, with scanty result. It remained for Spyridon Lambros to bring worldwide fame to the great treasure stored up on Mount Athos in the form of its MS collections. Lambros accomplished the feat of writing the descriptions of 6,618 MSS from eighteen different monasteries and a few sketes. His precious, two-volume work was published in Cambridge in 1895 and 1900. Access for cataloguing purposes to the two richest collections, those of the Great Lavra and Vatopedi monasteries, had not been granted to Lambros. The task of cataloguing those two libraries was carried out later by the two monks Arkadios Vatopedinos and Spyridon Lavriotis, who published two volumes in collaboration with Sofronios Efstratiadis, at Paris, in 1924 and 1925.⁴ These four volumes together cover about 10,250 MSS, and constitute today the sole catalogues available for these MSS. Also available are various later catalogues dealing with smaller collections. The most important are that of Evlogios Kourilas (272 MSS belonging to the Skete of Kafsokalyvia) and the Politis Manousakas supplementary catalogue (575 MSS).⁵

The quality of the available catalogues is what chiefly interests us here. At the end of the last and beginning of the present century MS cataloguing methods and the demands of research had not yet advanced very far. The information given in catalogues was rudimentary in comparison with modern data. Furthermore, the volume of material and the working conditions on Mount Athos meant that Lambros' catalogue was in the end little more than a list of the textual contents of his MSS. Codicological data, today considered essential to research, are totally missing. Only some of a MS's bibliographical notes, at the very best, are written up in the catalogue. The great achievement of Lambros' catalogue is that it made known this great number of manuscripts along with their contents, and that its information has proved to be reliable. The situation in the case of the other two main catalogues, those of Lavra and Vatopedi, is disappointing. In their case, too, the information given is little more than a listing of contents, but here experience shows that even these data are unreliable. It would be no exaggeration to say that more than 50% of the information given is incomplete and several times wrong. As for the very difficult problem of dating the MSS, the situation is positively tragic. Recent research of mine, for example, has revealed that there are 60 manuscripts in the Lavra library bearing chronological notes that date them within the fourteenth century, whereas the catalogue only gives 44. Some more recent Mount Athos MS catalogues apply modern cataloguing methodology, but the number of MSS they describe is less than a thousand, and does not even amount to one-fifteenth of the total volume of MSS. Thus we face an imperative need to recatalogue the known MSS and catalogue for the first time the many new discoveries. This has

been one of the major objectives of the Patriarchal Institute of Patristic Studies in Thessaloniki since its inception in 1969.

Since then the Institute has been engaged in the project of photographing and cataloguing all the MSS on Mount Athos. So far a systematic and detailed catalogue has been published of the 73 MSS of the skete of St. Dimitrios attached to Vatopedi Monastery.⁶ Four more catalogues, of Chiliandari (the uncatalogued manuscripts)⁷, Philotheou (the whole manuscript collection), Vatopedi (the first hundred catalogued manuscripts) and Lavra (a selected number of uncatalogued manuscripts), have been in course of preparation for several years: cataloguing is one of the most time-consuming forms of academic research. When these catalogues are finished they will provide description of about 650 MSS. What about the other fourteen thousand?

And this is precisely the problem which I wish to set before the present Conference: what can be done so that we can acquire catalogues of the MSS of Mount Athos in the context of the photographic and cataloguing programme of the Patriarchal Institute of Patristic Studies, but within a relatively short space of time? For if we continue at the present rate of progress, there is no denying that it will take several generations to complete the programme.

It is not necessary, I think, to recount here the various thoughts and attempts which have been made to solve the problem. I shall simply note two basic ideas of mine for shortening the length of time required to prepare the catalogues. My first thought concerns bibliography. Modern catalogues are expected to provide

114 a full bibliography, both of every single text to be found in

each MS, as well as of the MS itself. The bibliographical work is the most time-consuming part of the cataloguing procedure, since the researcher is often working virtually in the dark, so to speak, and frequently has only slight indications to work from like a detective, especially in the case of ascetic texts. For this reason my first thought is that of abolishing the bibliography given in MS descriptions: both that of the texts in question and that of the MS itself. The omission of bibliography does, it is true, work against the requirement that a good catalogue should be fully comprehensive; on the other hand, it in no way invalidates the account given of the data proceeding directly from the MS itself, as long as the cataloguer is skilled at his work and the information he provides is sufficiently detailed. For it is the manuscript itself which is the unknown factor, as far as the researcher is concerned. If the cataloguer gives him/her all the information to be derived from the manuscript, he/she can provide the bibliography him/herself. If this suggestion is accepted, it would save up to half the time required for cataloguing, in my estimation. Moreover, there are nowadays several reference works available (Initia Patrum, Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca, Clavis Patrum Graecorum, etc.), which cover a large part of the bibliography without the expenditure of much time. So the problem is essentially reduced to this: we have to decide whether it is preferable to produce one detailed catalogue with a bibliography or two detailed catalogues without a bibliography. My second idea for reducing cataloguing time has always been that computers should be used. Even though my experience in this field is slight, I began to believe two years ago that 115

a way was opening up towards realization of this idea, when I first came in contact through Nijmegen University with its project for cataloguing Slavonic MSS by computer. With the support and encouragement of Professors Veder and Koster, and the guidance of Professor Popofski, I applied their existing cataloguing programme to some MSS of the Vatopedi Skete of St. Dimitrios, of which I possessed a full description. I will not describe this programme here, it is, I suppose, well-known to the members of this Conference. I will only record my experiences with it: (1) the cataloguing system employed by this programme is very similar to that followed in the catalogue of MSS of the Skete of St. Dimitrios and it is as capable of being employed for Greek manuscripts as it is for Latin and Slavonic manuscripts, (2) MS cataloguing in general is probably much easier when it is done directly onto a computer than when it is done by hand. It should be noted, however, that I have no direct experience of this type of cataloguing, with the codex in one hand and the computer under the other, as it were. Yet I believe that it will present no problem when we have acquired the necessary experience and overcome the familiar taboos associated with new machines and new methods. I insist, however, on the necessity of feeding the description of each MS straight into the computer as it is composed. Only in this way can save time effectively, in accordance with our aims.

This means, however, that working conditions on Mount Athos have to be taken into account. Here is not the place to describe Athonite monastery life in all its individuality, although this considerably influences the progress of work done there.

116 One detail stands out, however: namely, that there is no electri-

city supply on Mount Athos. Some of the monasteries nowadays produce their own electricity from their own generators; but even this current is not available throughout the 24-hour period, and also tends to fluctuate. (The motive force used -- usually water-power -- does not remain continually at the same intensity.) I am told however, that this difficulty can be overcome through the use of batteries of some kind.

Further problems arise as a result of the necessity to transcribe texts from the Greek into the Latin alphabet, and back into the Greek alphabet during the second phase. If there is ever a possibility of converting the programme for use with the Greek alphabet, it will certainly be much easier to apply it for the preparation of catalogues of the MSS of Mount Athos. Another point which should be made is that it would be necessary to arrange for the cataloguing team to receive a suitable training in the use of the programme. This is very important, if the project is to be fully and properly realized.

There are further points that could be considered, but I think it best that this paper should end here. For it is more important that there should be discussion with regard to the possibilities of implementing the programme. It has been the object of my paper to provoke just such a discussion. For this reason an outline presentation only has been given of the material (i.e. the manuscripts), the circumstances under which they are preserved, and the need which exists for this material to be catalogued.

NOTES

1. This view is based on a passage in "Genesios": Migne, Patr.Gr. 109, 1095 B 1-5. Modern edition: A. Lesmüller-Werner and I. Thurn (CFHB) XIV, ser. Berolinensis) 1978. For a recent discussion of the "Genesios" passage see: P. Christou, Άγιον Όρος, Ιστορία, Τέχνη, Ζωή. Athens 1987, 40-42.
2. For the time being see: T. E. Sklaenitis, "Η βιβλιοθήκη των εντύπων της Μονής Μεγίστης Λαύρας". Μνημων, 11 (1986) 83, which also contains preceding bibliography on the manuscript library.
3. For the handy reference see: C. G. Patrinelis, s.v. "Άθως. Βιβλιοθήκη". Θρησκ. Ηθική Εγκυκλοπαιδεία. Vol. 1 (1962) col. 935-941, where also bibliography.
4. For catalogues prior to 1964 see: M. Richard, Répertoire des bibliothèques et des catalogues de manuscrits grecs. Paris 1958², 41-48; and Supplément I. Paris 1964, 11-13.
5. L. Politis & M. I. Manoussakas, Συμπληρωματικοί κατάλογοι χειρογράφων Αγίου Όρους. Thessaloniki 1973.
6. E. Lamberz & E. K. Litsas, Κατάλογοι χειρογράφων της Βατοπεδινής Σκήτης Αγίου Δημητρίου. Thessaloniki 1978.
7. E. Litsas, The Greek Manuscripts at Chilandar. Kirilo-Metho-dievski Studii, 3 (1986) 191-194.